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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: participation of volunteers, "White Helmets", in activities of the United Nations in the field of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and technical cooperation for development

The "White Helmets" initiative

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, in its resolutions 49/139 B of 20 December 1994 and 50/19 of 28 November 1995, called on the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), a programme administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and on the Department of Humanitarian Affairs — now Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, together with the entire United Nations system, to encourage the use of the expertise available through the "White Helmets" initiative. The White Helmets initiative was established by the Government of Argentina with the aim of promoting the concept of pre-identified, standby and trained teams of volunteers from various national volunteer corps that can be placed at the disposal of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in support of immediate relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development activities.

2. The General Assembly at its fifty-second session considered the report of the Secretary-General dated 10 November 1997 on the White Helmets (A/52/586). At the same session the Assembly adopted resolution 52/171 of 16 December 1997 on the White Helmets, in which it expressed appreciation for the progress achieved and recognized the potential of the concept. The Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to report to it at the fifty-fourth session on the implementation of the resolution.

3. The present report has been prepared in response to that request and covers the period from January 1998 to June 1999. It provides an overview of further progress made in collaboration with different partners, in particular with the Government of Argentina, through its Secretariat for International Humanitarian Assistance, also known as the White Helmets Commission for Argentina.

4. The report describes highlights of programme activities and their results, existing mechanisms and partnerships, financing and resources mobilization, and underscores opportunities for widening the operationalization of the concept. It incorporates findings emanating from the recently concluding UNV/White Helmets Commission programme review covering the period 1995–1999. The joint initiative and the consequent UNV/White Helmets programme were found to be highly appreciated by many parties concerned. Recipients, country offices and many individuals and organizations consulted by the review mission considered the programme relevant and viewed it with sympathy.

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5. Within the framework envisaged in the General Assembly resolutions, the Government of Argentina, through the White Helmets Commission, continued to actively support the expansion of the programme in collaboration with UNV. The UNV/White Helmets Commission partnership is an example of how the White Helmets concept and modality can be applied successfully. While most activities over the last two years were carried out through this partnership, other countries have designated focal points through which a widening of the initiative can be explored and pursued.

II. Highlights of programme activities

6. Activities undertaken in the context of the UNV/White Helmets Commission partnership include:

- In Rwanda and the Balkans, following the massive return of refugees, activities ranging from introduction of low-cost dwellings to provision of emergency humanitarian assistance were undertaken.
- With an emphasis on refugee settlement and internally displaced persons (IDPs), technical assistance for urban planning and renewal was provided to various municipalities in the autonomous areas of the occupied Palestinian territory.
- A project is currently under way to extend support to vulnerable groups in the autonomous areas of the occupied Palestinian territory. Technical expertise is being provided to strengthen the capacity of a local NGO (Avenir Foundation) in the development and application of special needs education and rehabilitation programmes for disabled youth.
- In the areas of disaster response, projects supporting humanitarian efforts of the United Nations system were implemented in the Eastern Caribbean. Likewise, paying equal attention to disaster preparedness and mitigation, assistance is currently being provided to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society.
- Initiatives promoting sports as a vehicle for social development were introduced to support post-conflict peace-building activities in the autonomous areas of the occupied Palestinian territory and Lebanon. In the latter case, the project was implemented in cooperation with Blue Helmets assigned with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).
- Poverty, coupled with the lack of basic services and infrastructure, presents severe problems in countries in transition. In this context, technical assistance focusing on rehabilitation of potable water systems and improvement of irrigation networks is being provided to communities in the Baalbek-Hermel region of Lebanon and the Petit Goave/Grand Goave region of Haiti. The latter activity is being jointly implemented with a French NGO.

7. Assistance to countries provided by the White Helmets Commission directly, outside the partnership with UNV and the United Nations system, has also demonstrated the potential success of fielding pre-identified, standby and trained teams of volunteers. During the reporting period, a total of US$ 4,700,000 was expended for these direct interventions. Examples of such assistance facilitated through teams of volunteers include:

- Relief supplies have been airlifted and distributed to the victims of natural catastrophes as an aftermath of the earthquakes in Bolivia and Colombia; El Niño-related flooding in Peru; Amazonian fires in Brazil; and to hurricane Mitch-affected countries and communities in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador;
- Within the framework of activities undertaken by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the regional Inter-American Defence Board (Junta Interamericana de Defensa), a humanitarian demining project is being implemented in Honduras and Nicaragua. Extension of project activities is also foreseen in Costa Rica;
- Under the auspices of UNDP and in collaboration with Japan, Spain, Greece, and the World Health Organization, a project in support of brucellosis control and eradication is under way in the autonomous areas of the occupied Palestinian territory.

III. Existing mechanisms and partnerships

8. All UNV/White Helmet Commission activities continued to be implemented within the framework of humanitarian assistance and development programmes of the United Nations agencies, directly responding to requests from host Governments or to appeals by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

9. During the reporting period, activities were undertaken in collaboration with such United Nations agencies as UNDP, the United Nations Office for Project Services, the

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations peacekeeping operations and national institutions in the beneficiary countries.

10. The recent UNV/White Helmets Commission programme cooperation review took note of the experience gained with the operationalization of the White Helmets concept and indicated that the concept could be translated into a valuable assistance modality. There is therefore scope to further build on the potential and to expand partnerships with other national volunteer corps, civil society, regional organizations and multilateral funding institutions.

11. Recent examples include collaboration with WFP and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the context of their emergency and humanitarian relief programmes. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has already trained one member of the White Helmets as a member of the Latin American group of the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team. The Office is currently discussing with the White Helmets the modalities for more members of the initiative to join the UNDAC team, and by doing so, for Argentina to play an active role in the UNDAC system.

12. With a view to fostering and strengthening partnerships in the Latin American and Caribbean region, in early 1998, the White Helmets Commission hosted a Regional Seminar on the White Helmets Initiative for International Cooperation and Humanitarian Assistance. Participants included government officials from 21 countries in the region.

13. OAS established a White Helmets Special Fund in 1998. This fund is operational and has financed White Helmets interventions in Central America and the Caribbean.

14. With the potential expansion of the network of partners, consideration is currently being given to the possible strengthening and broadening of consultative mechanisms to further promote and operationalize the concept.

IV. Financing and resources mobilization

15. The General Assembly in its resolution 49/139 B endorsed the establishment of a special financing window as part of the Special Voluntary Fund of UNV. For the reporting period (January 1998–June 1999), contributions amounting to $1,858,372 were administered. Since the inception of the initiative, total contributions received have amounted to $4,286,287.

16. The Government of Argentina continues to be the primary contributor to the UNV special financing window. Additionally, the Governments of France, Germany, Finland and Egypt have provided financial and human resources. A number of other countries have expressed interest in supporting activities through cash or in-kind contributions.

17. Other potential sources of additional financing are being explored. Examples are the Arab Gulf Programme for the United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and OAS.

V. Concluding observations

18. Findings from the joint programme cooperation review conducted by UNV and the White Helmets Commission indicate that a number of Member States are willing to consider creating and strengthening their volunteer capacities in support of the White Helmets initiative. The concept of pre-identified, standby and trained teams of volunteers is seen as a modality that can be made available to the United Nations through the United Nations Volunteers programme, in support of immediate relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development activities.

19. For UNV, the White Helmets Commission and other participating Governments to further build upon the successes and enable replication of these experiences in other Member States, it is hoped that additional financial contributions to the special financial window of UNV can be mobilized.

20. The General Assembly may wish to reaffirm its support to the White Helmets initiative under resolutions 49/139 B and 52/171 and request the relevant partners in the Member States and the United Nations system to further strengthen and apply this modality to address the needs engendered by humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters.